

# The Worker's Woe: A History of the Haymarket Affair

by Jennifer Gehlhausen  
Sidney, Ohio  
(1997 Hartje Award Winner)

The hour approaches noon in Chicago on Friday, 11 November 1887 as four men "with their arms pinioned, their wrists handcuffed, and their bodies cloaked in white, muslin shrouds"<sup>1</sup> are led to the scaffold. The nooses are placed securely around their necks when one shouts through the hood that covers his head, "the time will come when our silence will be more powerful than the voices you strangle today."<sup>2</sup> These are the final words of August Spies, as he and his fellow anarchists Adolph Fisher, Albert Parsons, and George Engel are hanged. These words mark, for the men, the close of a battle that began over a year before on 1 May 1886.<sup>3</sup>

The first day of May in 1886 was designated by the American Federation of Labour as the day which would mark the beginning of the eight hour workday. Chicago's leaders, who were plagued by striking workers in the railroad, gas, iron mill, meat packing, and plumbing industries,<sup>4</sup> held their breath as 1 May approached. Although more than 30,000 people demonstrate for an eight hour day, the first passes peacefully. Reassured by the lack of trouble, Chicagoans begin to think that the movement will die without violence. This is not to be.

On Monday, 3 May, the trouble begins. Striking workers at the McCormick Harvester factory attack the strike-breakers with sticks and rocks. Police at the scene begin firing into the throng of strikers. As reinforcements numbering almost 200 policemen arrive the strikers dissipate. Meanwhile, August Spies lectures to a group of striking lumber workers not far from the McCormick factory. He arrived at the scene to learn that six of the strikers have been killed. Angered by the tyranny of the bosses, he penned a circular calling the workingmen to unite in arms;<sup>5</sup> a meeting is called for the next evening at the Haymarket.

On the night of the meeting, a crowd of approximately 2,500 people gathers. This number is much smaller than anticipated, and the group moves from the Haymarket to Crane's alley. A rostrum is assembled, and Spies begins to address the crowd.

"The object of this meeting is to explain the general situation of the eight hour movement and to throw light upon various incidents in connection with it."<sup>6</sup> Carter Harrison, Chicago's mayor, was in the crowd; upon hearing Spies' remarks and the remarks of the second speaker Albert Parsons, he decides that the meeting is "tame" and tells Chicago Police Inspector John Bonfield to dismiss his reserves.<sup>7</sup> Bonfield instead goes to the alley where a group of approximately 300 remain listening to the closing remarks of the third and final speaker, Samuel Fielden. Bonfield, backed by 180 men, tells the crowd to "disperse immediately and peaceably." To this Fielden responds, "but Captain, we are peaceable."<sup>8</sup> Any further communication between the two is cut off as the explosion of a bomb rips through the crowd. One policeman is killed instantly, and several others are wounded, six of whom later die.<sup>9</sup> The police open fire on the audience.

The investigation into the events of the evening quickly turns into a witchhunt as offices, stores, and homes are raided, often without warrants.<sup>10</sup> Eventually eight men are on trial for murder; they were Spies, Parsons, Fisher, Engel, Fielden, Michael Schwab, Oscar Neebe, and Louis Lingg. These men cannot be connected to the bomb, and in fact, Engel, Schwab, Neebe, and Lingg were not even present at the rally.<sup>11</sup>

The trial is a farce. The Bailiff, Judge, and jury are all extremely biased against the defendants. The Bailiff even says "I am calling such men as the defendants will have to challenge peremptorily and waste their time and challenges. They will have to take such men as the prosecution wants."<sup>12</sup> The judge supports this action, saying that an admitted bias is an insufficient reason to remove a man from the jury.<sup>13</sup>

It is late August when the jury delivers its verdict; all eight are found guilty: Neebe was given a fifteen year sentence and the rest are ordered to hang. Appeals to both the Illinois and United States Supreme Courts fail. Spies, Fielden, and Schwab

petition the governor for executive clemency, but it is not until two days before the hanging, when Spies inexplicably withdraws his petition, that the governor converts the sentences of Fielding and Schwab to life imprisonment. Louis Lingg commits suicide by placing

a dynamite cap in his mouth the day before the trial. On 11 November 1887, the remaining four: Spies, Parsons, Fisher, and Engel are hanged. All eight later are proven to have no connection to the bombing.<sup>14</sup>

### Bibliography

Avrich, Paul. *The Haymarket Tragedy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984.

Bonney, Charles. *The Present Conflict of Labor and Capital*. Chicago: Chicago Legal News, 1886.

David, Henry. *The History of the Haymarket Affair*. New York: Russell and Russell, 1958.

"Introduction: Haymarket Remembered." On the Internet. <http://19211.16.13/individuals/kuniklon/haymarket/intro.html#1886>.

Nelson, Bruce. *Beyond The Martyrs: A Social History of Chicago's Anarchists, 1870-1900*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988.

"Why Mayday?" On the Internet. <http://www.cs.utah.edu/~gait/mayday.html>.

Wischmann, Lesley. "Remembering the Haymarket Anarchists: A Hundred Years Later." In *Monthly Review*. October 1987. Volume 39.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Henry David, *The History of the Haymarket Affair*, (New York: Russell and Russell, 1958), 463.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 393.

<sup>3</sup> It is acknowledged that labor unrest did not spontaneously begin on 1 May 1886; however, this is the day that the American Federation of Labour resolved would constitute the beginning of the eight hourday. Thus, especially due to the brevity of this paper, it will be used as a starting point to explore the events of the Haymarket Affair.

<sup>4</sup> David, 187.

<sup>5</sup> Lesley Wischmann, "Remembering the Haymarket Anarchists: A Hundred Years Later," in *Monthly Review*, October 1987, volume 39, 19.

<sup>6</sup> Avrich, 200.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>8</sup> Wischmann, 19.

<sup>9</sup> Of the police officers wounded and dead, medical evidence later showed that many of their injuries were the result of the policemen's own bullets, which in their panic had been fired into the backs of their fellow officers.

<sup>10</sup> "Why Mayday," on the Internet.

<sup>11</sup> Of the eight brought to trial, only Samuel Fielden remained at the meeting at the time of the bombing. Wischmann, 19.

<sup>12</sup> Wischmann, 23.

<sup>13</sup> Avrich, 263.

<sup>14</sup> Introduction: "Haymarket Remembered," on the Internet.